
Life Stories of Civil War Heroes



The Biography of

Clara Barton

"The True Heroine of the Age"

Clara Barton is best known as being the founder of the American Red Cross and, prior to this significant achievement, as a nurse who tended to countless wounded soldiers on Civil War battlefields. Her tireless, compassionate work during the Battle of Antietam in the Civil

War would inspire praise of her as being "the true heroine of the age, the angel of the battlefield"—the latter part of the phrase associated with her name thereafter. But why this courageous woman chose to pursue a challenging and difficult career path despite great obstacles, and how much else she accomplished and endured in her long and productive life, is just as noteworthy as the work for which she is well remembered.

The Need to be Useful

Clarissa Harlowe Barton was born in North Oxford, Massachusetts on December 25, 1821 to Stephen and Sarah (Stone) Barton. Her father, a farmer and miller who provided a modest income for the family, was charitable, socially aware, and a believer in abolitionism and the importance of education. Her mother, while in agreement with her husband on abolitionism, was outspoken on women's rights, eccentric, thrifty, and possessed a fiery temperament and strong will. Frequently at odds with one another, the stormy couple created a volatile home for their three daughters and two sons. As a result of growing up as the youngest child in an uncertain environment, Clara was timid and withdrawn. Throughout her life she would always seek acceptance and confirmation of her worth.

When Clara was three she began her schooling—not an uncommon age to start a formal education (at the time). Early on, her teachers were impressed with this quiet girl's advanced reading abilities, and soon were also pleased with her accomplishments in writing, arithmetic, and geography. In all her years in school, Clara excelled in the classroom and received much attention and praise as a scholar. While most girls her age were discouraged

from active intellectual pursuits, her liberal and unconventional family encouraged her scholastic achievements. Likewise, for many years they did not discourage her tomboyish ways, and permitted her to ride horses bareback and to engage in mock playtime battles with her brothers based on wartime stories told by their father, a former captain.

It was not until her late childhood that Clara's parents began to steer her towards more girlish activities. To gain their acceptance, she began to take on traditionally feminine household tasks, embracing the strong work ethic they instilled within her. At age 11, when her brother David fell from the rafters of a newly raised barn, Clara volunteered to nurse him, and for two years fulfilled this occupation with great devotion. As she grew into adolescence, her parents encouraged her involvement in charitable work such as tutoring children and nursing poor families during a small pox epidemic. Unlike most persons her age, Clara chose to spend most of her free time actively assisting others by alleviating their illnesses or troubles. This was the beginning of a lifetime of work from which she would always receive her greatest satisfaction.

In her early adulthood, the diminutive Miss Barton began teaching at various schools in the community, working without wages in poorer areas; instructing students whose ages in one classroom ranged from toddlers to late teens. Clara's pupils regarded her with respect and admiration, and her innate shyness seemed to dissipate before an attentive, appreciative audience. Her own interest in learning was infectious; her treatment of her students was judicious and fair, and she had a talent for being a disciplinarian without needing to use force. The toughest boys in class were won over by her athletic prowess when she participated in their noon recess activities—a strategy she used to keep them from playing too roughly with their classmates. But as much as she cared about her students and the classrooms in which she taught, the unique challenges of each school held her interest, and once overcome, she pursued new ones elsewhere.

New and Greater Challenges

The mid-1840s found Clara embarking upon her first crusade to aid the distressed and underprivileged. At one school, having taught classes in a dilapidated building, and finding the textbooks and supplies inadequate and the attendance inconsistent, Clara carefully drafted a plan for improvements and presented her ideas at the town meeting. Clara's efforts were rewarded when the school was reestablished in one of the area's largest, central mills, and equipped with maps, blackboards, and a clock for teaching purposes, per her specifications. Consequently, her 70 pupils—ages four through 24, comprised of American-born, as well as English, Irish, and French-born students—were able to attend her class regularly and receive a better education in reading, writing, and arithmetic, algebra, bookkeeping, philosophy, chemistry, and ancient and natural history.

Following this victory, Clara contemplated the years ahead and dreaded to think of the limitations for a woman of the time living in a milling and farming community. She needed challenges beyond teaching in a small town, and decided to further her education so she could advance her career. With few schools offering a higher education to women, in 1850 she enrolled out of state at Clinton Liberal Institute, a well-respected, co-educational academy in Clinton, New York, run by the Universalist Church (the denomination of the church in which she had been raised). Being 10 years older than the average female student at the academy, she did not easily find friends among her peers, but her dedication to her studies occupied most of her time. An even greater difficulty to overcome was dealing with her separation from home and family. For though she was adventurous and ambitious, deep inside she was still the timid girl of her childhood.



Clara Barton, circa 1850. Image care of Elizabeth Brown Pryor's book.

In July 1851 when her mother passed away, Clara was overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness. With the death and financial difficulties weighing heavily upon her, Clara left Clinton regretfully, her education incomplete; her career and future uncertain. She stayed with friends in Hightstown, New Jersey and taught at local schools in the area. Surprised to learn of the non-existence of a free education, she introduced this concept in Bordentown. But her stay would be short-lived. Upon discovering that she was being compensated far less than a newly-hired gentleman appointed her superior, Clara returned home to North Oxford in February 1854, devastated and despondent.

Clara and Fanny Childs—a friend from North Oxford who taught with her in Bordentown—decided to journey to the nation's Capitol in search of new employment opportunities. In the sleepy town of Washington, Clara met the commissioner of patents, Charles Mason, who was impressed with her great skills as a conversationalist, fair judgment, and political awareness. He offered her the coveted job of a recording clerk in the Patent Office where she began working in July 1854, copying patent applications, caveats, and regulations; receiving the same salary as her male colleagues. However, her career was abruptly halted in 1857 due to the sudden resignation of Mason. Until he would return to his position in December 1860 and rehire her, in the interim Clara spent time with friends and family in New York and Massachusetts where she enrolled in French and art classes. But her dedication to helping others would never desert her, and during this time she also financially supported a nephew who was ill with tuberculosis, until her funds were exhausted. Fortunately, it was not long before she was recalled to her post at the Patent Office. A few months later in April 1861, Fort Sumter was fired upon, and the Civil War had begun.

A Humanitarian and Human "Angel of the Battlefield"

Clara exuberantly assisted the Union army by gathering and purchasing provisions for the

soldiers, and it wasn't long before local women and relief societies learned of her charitable activities and brought her boxes of goods to deliver to the men. During the First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas) in July 1861, the U.S. government—ill-prepared for an escalating war—sent scores of wounded men to the neighboring city of Washington where makeshift hospitals sprung up overnight in homes and unlikely buildings such as the Patent Office. After aiding the soldiers in Washington, she was inspired by her former landlady Almira Fales to actively administer assistance to the wounded on the battlefields. Clara soon would no longer be working at the Patent Office, but would still receive wages from the government due to her staunch support of the Union army.

At first Clara was not heartily welcomed by army officials who initially refused her assistance and supplies, believing that she would be more of a hindrance than a helper on the field. In that day and age, society frowned upon an unmarried woman straying out of the home, believing that at best she belonged in an organization of women; certainly not alone among men. Though Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts (who was also commander-in-chief of the Massachusetts forces) supported her cause, Clara had to persist in her efforts to convince the quartermaster that she would be a valuable asset on the front lines.

Finally, on August 2, 1861, Clara delivered her supplies to Fredericksburg and, in her first encounter with the field hospital, was appalled by the chaos of untrained ambulances, the lack of clean bandages and fresh water, and the delay in the arrival of government issued supplies. A week later when the battle at Cedar Mountain erupted, she rushed to Culpeper where wounded soldiers filled the train depot that served as a makeshift relief station. The sight that greeted Clara horrified her. Surgeons in pus- and bloodstained coats routinely amputated a countless number of shattered limbs, tossing them in heaps outside the door. The filth of the hospital and conditions in which recuperating men lingered sickened her and touched her with sadness. She and a couple of friends who had accompanied her on this mission prepared food, made bandages, held hands, cleaned the hospital and men, and assisted the surgeons in any way that they could. Not long afterwards, her impartial care for the sufferer would take her to a hospital of Confederate prisoners, where she brought every article of food and clothing she could obtain for the comfort of the sick or wounded.

The war would linger on longer than anyone could have imagined, and Clara's strength of character would be tested time and time again. The following year, after the Second Battle of Bull Run in late August 1862, Clara arrived at Fairfax Station, dismayed to see thousands of wounded soldiers blanketing the hillside beneath the blazing sun. Many of these men had received no food or water for two days, so Clara immediately prepared them a kettle of cornmeal, and after this was gone created a concoction of what meager provisions were available: crushed army biscuits ("hardtack"), wine, water, and brown sugar. She brought them clean shirts, bound their wounds, gave them their last rites, and offered words of kindness and encouragement to the weary, working without food or rest for two days. Though she endured more than one person's share of work, she discovered that she enjoyed working alone. In mid-September at Harpers Ferry and South Mountain, accompanied to the

battlefields by two women, Clara found it preferable to do the work herself than delegate orders to others.

Days later, at the bloody battlefield at Antietam (Sharpsburg), Clara provided assistance to the surgeons at the Poffenberger Farm (among them Dr. James Dunn whom she had met at Culpeper). By now, having witnessed numerous surgical procedures, Clara no longer flinched at the sight of an amputation that was performed without the use of chloroform on a patient, and neither did she cry when learning of the death of a former class pupil. She herself extracted a bullet from the face of a young soldier using her pocketknife, and while holding the face of another soldier to offer water, had a bullet pass through her sleeve and into the wounded victim. Through all she endured thus far in the war, Clara had become a stronger, confident woman. The appreciation she received from those she nursed gratified her and gave her a feeling of self-worth. Watching her perform her tasks tirelessly, dutifully, compassionately, and without fear, Dr. Dunn's wife remarked that Clara was "the true heroine of the age, the angel of the battlefield."

For six weeks Clara ceaselessly toiled in the field, until she was stricken ill with typhoid fever. After a month's recuperation in Washington, she caught up with the army at Harpers Ferry, then moved on with them to Fredericksburg. During the brutal battle in mid-December, she and fellow worker Walt Whitman assisted Clarence Cutter (the old regimental surgeon of the 21st Massachusetts) at the hospital set up in the Lacy House. She worked there through the last week in December 1862, living in a tent beside her wagon, and returned to the Capitol only when her supplies were depleted and most of the wounded men had either died or were sent on to Washington for treatment. It would be a long and bitter winter, with no end in sight for the war or its suffering victims.

The intensity of her work in the field gave Clara little time to dwell on any personal feelings of sorrow, but likewise there was also little which brought her personal happiness, aside from the appreciation of thousands of soldiers and their loved ones. The summer of 1863 would change her fortune. Arriving at Hilton Head, South Carolina, she was pleased to be reunited with her brother David who had just been appointed quartermaster. But it was meeting Colonel John J. Elwell of Cleveland, Ohio, chief quartermaster for the Department of the South, that rejuvenated her spirit. She and Elwell discovered that they shared many common interests and, though he was married, became romantically involved. For a while Clara felt a strong connection with someone for the first time in her life. Elwell found himself mesmerized by this witty, intelligent, and courageous woman, and encouraged their relationship despite the impropriety of the situation. Albeit unconventional in her thought and demeanor, as a realist Clara knew their relationship could not last, and did not wish to break up Elwell's marriage, so neither pursued the other once their work on the island was terminated, though they would always remain fond of each other.

On July 16, 1863 the Federals attacked Fort Wagner on Morris Island—not far from Hilton Head where Clara was stationed—but their efforts to take the fort had failed. Without a great

number of surgeons present, the soldiers who were not critically injured received attention, while those who were most severely wounded were left to die. If not for assistance from women such as Clara, a large number of these unaided soldiers would have perished. Bringing them a drink of water or a kind word, Clara revitalized their spirits, and many later would say that she was like an angel of mercy in the midst of death and destruction.

A Nation and its Citizens in Need of Healing

After the battle at Fort Wagner, Clara remained in the region, helping the newly-emancipated blacks on a contraband plantation at Port Royal. Under the influence of Frances ("Aunt Fanny") Gage, a woman from Ohio in charge of the plantation, Clara came to realize her feminist beliefs, and also became aware of the plight of the black residents here. She had admired the black soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and their acts of bravery during the siege on Morris Island, and now admired the dedicated plantation workers and their rich culture. By teaching the blacks to read, and by bringing them food and clothing, Clara came to understand that while they were now free, they had no education or property. They had no way to earn a living beyond what they had been taught by their masters while they were in bondage.

During her stay on the coast of South Carolina and its chain of little islands, Clara had concerns beyond that of the suffering of humanity. She came under personal attack by army officials, as well as the Sanitary Commission and Christian Commission, and was nearly forced out of continuing her work. The Sanitary Commission was a key provider and distributor of relief supplies during the war, aided by the Christian Commission, a branch of the YMCA headed by Dorothea Dix, whose nurses offered "relief, sympathy, and the gospel" to soldiers. These three organizations sought to ban her services and presence on the battlefields, believing that they should be the sole providers of aid and support to the soldiers. Moreover, Clara's independence from these groups, and her desire to work alone and keep to herself had created feelings of mistrust about her. Though she was devastated by the news, eventually the whole matter blew over in time when key members of the group re-evaluated the situation. Clara even worked with the Christian Commission on a task to bring crackers and coffee to the soldiers.

For the remainder of the war Clara persisted in her independent relief efforts, though she received assistance at Petersburg in 1864 when the surgeons there had brought in unskilled nurses to serve as her subordinates, much to her dismay. After the 10-month siege at Petersburg, the momentum of the war favored the Federals, and a final victory was attained in April 1865 with the Confederacy's surrender of arms at Appomattox Court House.

The war had ended, but Clara's work continued. Prior to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln that April, she had received approval from him to search for missing soldiers, and now reported to work on this task at the War Department in Annapolis. This department provided food, clothing, and assistance with correspondence for prisoners of war

returning from Belle Isle and Andersonville, and also was responsible for recording the deaths of soldiers. Observing that the soldiers seemed the most knowledgeable on identifying the names of other soldiers—distinguishing the living from the dead—she thought to solicit their assistance. Clara published, posted, and distributed lists of the names of missing soldiers in sources such as newspapers and post offices, and at various organizations. She received an overwhelmingly positive response from the public, and helped to reunite countless soldiers with their loved ones.

Through this project, Clara was led to another project that called for the identification and formal burial of thousands of Andersonville prisoners. Dorence Atwater, a former prisoner there, had records of official registers from the prison that located each soldier's position in one of many long, unmarked trench graves, and he contacted Clara with this information. Under the direction of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Clara and a party of 40 members arrived at the old prison site in Georgia on July 25 to assume this massive undertaking. Headboards were lettered, and fences and walkways were constructed; the graveyard at Andersonville had been transformed into a national cemetery. By mid-August, nearly 13,000 graves were identified, with 400 graves marked "Unknown U.S. Soldier." With the help of Atwater, a total of 22,000 men would be identified before work on the missing soldiers project would come to a close.



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The Biography of

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The Birth of the Red Cross

In the fall of 1866, at the suggestion of Fanny Gage, Clara began lecturing on her Civil War experiences in lyceum halls, churches, town halls and schoolrooms. Though she never felt comfortable in front of an audience, wherever she spoke she was well-received, and soon the tales of her work on the battlefields became widely known and even legendary. Clara was even asked to speak on behalf of women's rights, and at a Universal Franchise Convention in 1868 proclaimed that blacks had suffered far greater wrongs than women in their oppression.

When she was 48, Clara embarked on a whirlwind tour of Europe with her sister Sally, and remained overseas after Sally returned home to the United States. While in Switzerland, Clara was visited by Dr. Louis Appia of the International Convention of Geneva (otherwise known as the Red Cross) who had heard of her work during the Civil War and hoped that she could persuade the U.S. government to acknowledge the articles of the Geneva Convention. These articles—which legally bound the signatory nations to an agreement that impartial relief would be provided to the wounded, sick, and homeless during wartime—formed the basis of the Red Cross, founded in 1864 by Swiss businessman (Jean) Henri Dunant. In 1859, Dunant had witnessed the horrors of the bloody aftermath at the Battle of Solferino, Italy, and was inspired by the compassionate acts of the peasant women who bound the wounds of their soldiers as well as the enemy's while murmuring that "all are brothers." (See the article about the Battle of Solferino.)

On July 18, 1870, France had declared war on Prussia and its German allies, and by the end of the month Clara signed up with the Red Cross. She was paired with a young Swiss woman to assist refugees at the French and German border in Mulhausen and Strasbourg. Clara was impressed with the effectiveness of the Red Cross and the training of its members. In four months they had accomplished what could not be done in four years during the Civil War. Her work in Strasbourg continued until June 1, 1871, prior to which time Clara met another admirer of her wartime accomplishments, Grand Duchess Louise, daughter of Kaiser Wilhelm. She and the grand duchess (founder of the German branch of the Red Cross)

became friends, and for awhile Clara worked at the Red Cross Hospital in Baden. In 1873, Clara was the first woman to receive the Iron Cross of Germany by Kaiser Wilhelm for her services. But her fortune would soon take a turn for the worse. By the end of that year her sister Sally became gravely ill, and Clara returned home to America. Depressed by Sally's death in spring 1874, Clara suffered from a nervous breakdown and spent time in recuperation at a sanitarium in Dansville, New York.

Three years later, at the outbreak of the war between Russia and Turkey in spring 1877, Clara thought of forming an American Red Cross Society which would provide relief to the sufferers, but her dream did not materialize. The U.S. government still had not accepted the Treaty of Geneva due to the interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine regarding international intervention in American affairs, which the doctrine prohibits. Clara worked on further expanding the concept of the American Red Cross to include aid to citizens during natural and manmade disasters. She also wrote and published a pamphlet, *The Red Cross of the Geneva Convention: What It Is*, to educate the public and to generate more support for her cause. After many years of persistence—lobbying against a bureaucracy that believed the acceptance of the International Red Cross would jeopardize the autonomy of the United States—on May 21, 1881 the American Red Cross finally was born.

The Legacy of the American Red Cross



Clara Barton in Cuba, 1898, prior to the Spanish-American War. Image care of Elizabeth Brown Pryor's book.

The first auxiliary chapter of the American Red Cross opened in Dansville on August 22, 1881, and the second one opened in nearby Rochester a few weeks later with the help of Susan B. Anthony. By next spring, on March 16, 1882, the Treaty of Geneva passed the Senate and was signed by President Chester Alan Arthur, signifying a major milestone in the lifework of Clara Barton.

A year later, with new Red Cross chapters opening in other states, President Barton could step back a little from expending all her efforts in advertising for the organization and building up its membership. At the request of Governor Benjamin F. Butler (former Civil War general), she fulfilled a temporary position as superintendent at the Woman's Reformatory Prison of Massachusetts in Sherborn, beginning in May 1883. For more than six months Clara oversaw the activities at this institution and made suggestions for improvements. Though she had little personal contact with the prisoners, with her dignity, poise, and personal magnetism she served as an inspiration to them.

Returning to the Red Cross in February 1884, Clara assisted the flood victims of the Ohio

River, then the Mississippi River. In September, she attended the Third International Conference of the Red Cross in Geneva as the first female diplomat to represent the United States. The conference voted to adopt the principles Clara had instituted in the American Red Cross; the international organization also would serve during peacetime to assist victims of natural and manmade disasters. Following the Conference, Clara received the Augusta Medal by Empress Augusta of Baden (Germany) for her outstanding humanitarian work.

In the subsequent years of the 1880s, victims of fires, an earthquake, drought, tornado, flood, and a yellow fever epidemic received aid and assistance from the Red Cross. Clara learned the importance of educating victims to look after themselves and to take precautions, so that they would be able to rebuild their homes and lives again after Red Cross workers had left. This concept of teaching first aid in the home would later be realized in the formation of first aid classes—a vital part of the American Red Cross's service today.

The 1890s found Clara pursuing activities with the women's auxiliaries of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the Potomac Corps, and Women's Relief Corps, as well as the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). At the final gala meeting of the Potomac Corps of the Women's Relief Corps, she recited a poem she had written only hours before the event. This poem, "The Women Who Went to the Field," honors those who served in the same capacity as she had in the Civil War. During this decade Clara also established the Red Cross headquarters at the corner of 17th and F Streets in Washington, then relocated the operations five years later in 1897 to her home in Glen Echo, Maryland. In addition to the ongoing work of providing disaster relief to needy parts of the nation, the American Red Cross also provided famine relief abroad to Russia and Turkey-Armenia. Despite the danger of the wartime situation, Clara personally assisted Christian Armenians and Turkish Muslims by impartially distributing food and medical aid on the battlefield. For her exceptional service to the Ottoman Empire, she was awarded the second order of *Shekafet* by the pasha of Constantinople—the first of its kind to be given to a woman.

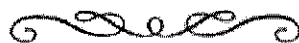
The Spanish-American War marked the first war-related mission in which Miss Barton's organization assisted the U.S. military. As tensions mounted between Cuba and Spain, President William McKinley named the American Red Cross as part of the Central Cuban Relief Committee (CCRC) to assist the Cubans (who were under Spanish rule). On February 9, 1898, Clara arrived in Havana with some of her members and faced a bleak situation that was worsened by drought. The circumstances were further exacerbated with the explosion of the U.S.S. *Maine* in the Havana harbor days later on the 15th. The American Red Cross team set up soup kitchens, provided supplies to hospitals, distributed clothing, and helped to establish orphanages before the inevitable war began at the end of April. Despite America's declaration of war on Spain, Clara was still committed to providing relief to civilians, and at age 77, worked 16 hours a day preparing food and applying ice to feverish victims. She even cooked gruel for a few of Teddy Roosevelt's wounded Rough Riders who had engaged in some bloody skirmishes at Santiago. The Red Cross also had other important matters to attend to with the outbreak of malaria, typhoid, dysentery, and yellow fever in the recruit

camps and American bases in Cuba.

At the turn of the century Miss Barton lived frugally and modestly as before and still maintained a youthful attitude, keeping up with the times and welcoming new technology in her home and office. Her continued role as president of the Red Cross brought her accolades and praise, and conversely an equal amount of criticism and complaints. In 1902 she was presented the Silver Cross of Imperial Russia, the nation's highest civilian honor, awarded her by Czar Nicholas II in memory of her relief work in Russia many years ago. During this time her presidency and administration also fell under scrutiny and attack, with the management of the organization's finances a source of debate. Finally, at age 82, without the energy to fight her critics any longer, Clara resigned from her presidency on May 14, 1904 and retired to her home in Glen Echo. Her final work for relief efforts was with the short-lived National First Aid Association of America, established in 1905. First aid classes were taught, and the original first aid kits were also developed at this time. Though the association would founder, by 1909 first aid training would be incorporated as one of the essential functions of the American Red Cross. With the passage of time, Clara's vision would prove to be true: first aid practiced in the home would help more people than the Red Cross ever could, and emergency preparedness would prove to be the most important element of disaster relief.

In the final years of her life, Clara wrote a short autobiography entitled *The Story of My Childhood*, published in 1907. But she would not live to write the story of her incredible lifework. For a woman who had endured and accomplished so much—who had devoted so much of her life in helping others to live—the force of life within her had become so strong that even her death had become a struggle. At the age of 90 and battling pneumonia, on April 12, 1912 she finally succumbed to death at her home in Glen Echo and would be buried in the family cemetery plot in Oxford, Massachusetts. Though she had been the center of controversy in all of her work throughout her long life, in the end Clara outlasted her critics, and always would be remembered for her compassionate work in the field, as well as for her legacy of the Red Cross which thrives today. In 1903, when a case of typhoid fever broke out in Butler, Pennsylvania, Clara was there to help, as she had been for others for so many years. A young man who witnessed her work commented on Miss Barton's presence there that night in a way that sums up what so many persons she assisted had thought of her:

And we pictured the light (of the lantern) going on and on through the night until it should stop over the stricken town of Butler, and the suffering people there would look upon it as the light of a great soul that had come to them out of the darkness, bringing comfort and healing and the calm spirit that banishes all fear.



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